

**Jacek Józef Proszyk, *The History of Jews in Bielsko (Bielitz) and Biala between 17th Century and 1939. Liberals, Zionists and Orthodox Jews on the Border of Galicia and Austrian Silesia*, HASKALA, tr. M. Jaszczurowska, Jaworze 2014, 345 pages, e-book (pdf).**

Wojciech KOSIOR

The book under review is an English translation of *Life according to Values. The Jewish Liberals, Orthodox and Zionists in Bielsko and Biala* [Życie według wartości. Żydowscy liberalowie, ortodoksi i syjoniści w Bielsku i Białej], Jaworze 2012. The publication forms part of a doctoral thesis entitled *Between the Orthodoxy, Haskalah and Zionism. Social and Religious Changes in the Jewish Communities in Bielsko and Biala Krakowska in the Years 1918–1939* [Pomiędzy ortodoksją, haskalą a syjonizmem. Przemiany społeczne i religijne w żydowskich gminach wyznaniowych w Bielsku i Białej Krakowskiej w latach 1918–1939] written at the Institute for the Study of Religions under the supervision of Prof. Krzysztof Pilarczyk.<sup>1</sup> The author, Jacek Proszyk is a historian with a particular interest in the interreligious dialogue of the Jews, Protestants and Catholics witnessed in Teschen Silesia. So far he has published over 20 papers on a variety of subjects within the field of Jewish Studies and regional history as well as two books: *The Jewish Cemetery in Bielsko-Biala* [Cmentarz żydowski w Bielsku-Białej] (2002) and *Salomon Joachim Halberstam* (2009). In addition to this, Proszyk has conducted several research projects and has actively participated in numerous local social endeavours.

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<sup>1</sup>J. J. Proszyk, *ibidem*, p. 13.

He is also a member of several academic associations, inter alia the Polish Association for Jewish Studies and the Polish Association for the Study of Reformation.<sup>2</sup>

The main thrust of the present book is that the cities of Bielsko and Biala Krakowska between 17th Century and 1939 were inhabited by the representatives of various nationalities, cultures and religions who had lived side by side for years. This diversity was also reflected in the structure and nature of the local Jewish communities; a relatively small space served as a home for three very different Jewish lifestyles: Enlightened, Orthodox and Zionist. Proszyk goes against the stereotypical dichotomy present in academic literature eager to paint an image of a liberal Bielsko and a traditional Biala and proves that the internal diversity in regards with values and ideals went farther than that. In turn, the main purpose of the book is to give an account of this social and religious phenomena. This task is clearly reflected in the book's structure which is divided into six parts. The first two chapters (*The Development of Jewish Communities and their Social and Religious Character in Bielsko and Biala before 1918* and *Jewish Religious Communities in Bielsko and Biala Krakowska in 1918-1939*) concisely present the earlier history of the Jewish communities highlighting the activity of religious and secular institutions in both qahals. In this section, Proszyk draws mainly from the work of the other researchers and thus paves the way for the essential part of the book which is contained in chapters three to five devoted subsequently to the liberal, traditional (both Orthodox and Hassidic Jewry) and Zionist notions in both municipalities. Each movement is analysed within a coherent structure involving elaboration on the essential social institutions like temples, synagogues or press organs and the presentation of charismatic leaders. The author aptly shows that the diversity ran far deeper and the differences were part and parcel of each separate notions as well. Still, chapter six (*Unfulfilled Hopes, Unaccepted Political Changes and the Proximity of War*) convincingly shows that this internal diversification of Jewish life had gradually become irrelevant in the face of Antisemitism and its manifestations that took place in the years directly preceding the Second World War. Yet, Proszyk asks rhetorically: "What would a book about a Jewish community be without any mention of humour and anecdotes?"<sup>3</sup> and succeeds in maintaining the optimistic vibe of the book by concluding it with a section devoted entirely to Jewish humour.

<sup>2</sup>[[www](http://www.proszyk.com/o-mnie/)] <http://www.proszyk.com/o-mnie/>

<sup>3</sup>J. J. Proszyk, *ibidem*, p. 324.



The book is the result of the enormous amount of work the author put into gathering his evidence. Proszyk has painstakingly gathered and published materials that would otherwise be known only to people visiting archives scattered around Poland and Israel. These include archival records, personal memoirs and letters, original articles and advertisements in newspapers (such as “*Judisches Volksblatt*”; “*Judische Wochenpost mit Wirtschaftsblatt*”; “*Nowy Dziennik*”). Many of them are cited in their entirety thus lifting the value of the work as a collection of primary sources bearing witness to the previous époque. A separate matter is the visual aspect of the publication. The book contains a vast number of original and otherwise unpublished photographs of people and places. These include both archival materials and contemporary pictures documenting the present state. It is worth acknowledging that the transition to electronic format allowed the introduction of colour and hi-resolution pictures which is a definite improvement on the paperback edition.<sup>4</sup>

The overall value of the book notwithstanding, it is not without flaws. First and foremost, what stands out is a complete lack of apparatus with only the general information (bibliography, names of archives, newspapers) retained at the end of the file. The Polish edition contains almost 700 (!) end-notes which number over 20 pages in total and more often than not contain information that is crucial for a proper understanding of the presentation. This choice is even less justified given the fact that electronic publications support more convenient alternatives (such as hyperlinks) to the conventional notes. Secondly, the transcription of the Hebrew words and phrases lacks uniformity. For example, Ashkenazic vocalisation is sometimes retained (e.g. *poisek*, p. 241) and sometimes not (e.g. *mohel*, p. 91); the silent *h* is sometimes written (e.g. *bimah*, p. 28; *mikveh*, p. 215) sometimes not (e.g. *Chewra Kadisha*, p. 41; *kehilla* p. 114). Moreover, some of the transcriptions were kept in their Polish versions (e.g. *Irgun Jozef Bielsko-Biala*, p. 13, *Mea Szearim*, p. 14, *Siach Jicchak* on p. 61, *Sefer ha-Szeratot* on p. 66) while some were even left inflected according to the Polish declension (e.g. *chalafu* instead of *chalaf*, p. 217). Still, it should be acknowledged that the task of unifying the transcription system is arduous given the fact that throughout the analysed period a wide variety of systems, adhering to both Ashkenazic and Sephardic pronunciation, were used. Thirdly, some of the illustrations were given without any description (e.g. the pictures on pp. 58, 60) thus leaving

<sup>4</sup>For instance, the reader can now decipher the tomb inscriptions contained on p. 17.



the reader to guess their context. Finally, it would have been helpful if more of the Hebrew, Polish and German terms (e.g. p. 225) had been translated into English. These drawbacks, however, are mostly editorial and as such are definitely outweighed by the pros. Obviously the main value of the book lies in the fact that it gives an account of the unique social and religious situation of the cities in particular historical and geographical circumstances. Proszyk presents the internal dynamics of the Jews eager to form unions in case of danger (e.g. Orthodox and Hassidism against the liberal movement), the quest for new media of Jewishness promoted by the adherents of progressive Judaism (such as sport and culture) or, last but not least, the religious dimension of Zionism's promise of a land flowing with milk and honey.

Proszyk keeps the balance between strict academic parlance supported by solid historical data on the one hand and fleshy language of anecdotes and personal memoirs on the other. This in turn makes the book a good choice both for academics specialising in the subject and a wider audience of those simply interested in the history of the Polish Jewry. Moreover, the pedagogical value of the book is worth mentioning, which as such could be included in the curriculum of academic introductory courses in Jewish Studies. The author elaborates on the essential issues such as the inherent complexity of the Jewish culture, the modern clash between Orthodoxy and Liberalism or the beginnings of the Zionism movement while at the same time providing some vivid and colourful exemplification and making the understanding of these processes much easier.

#### Note about the author

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